Slaughter Seeks Answers at Joint Congressional Rove Hearing- July 22, 2005

Slaughter Seeks Answers at Joint Congressional Rove Hearing

Opening Remarks at House & Senate Joint Congressional Hearing on National Security Implications of Disclosing the Identity of a Covert Intelligence Officer

July 22, 2005

Good morning. And I want to give my thanks, Senator Dorgan, and to you, Henry Waxman, for bringing this hearing together on what is a most important subject, and one that occupies most of our minds.

And let me add my thanks to the witnesses for your courage and your bravery but, moreover, for your service to your country.

George W. Bush campaigned on restoring dignity to the White House. During his first inaugural address, he affirmed the commitment to live out our nation's promise through civility, courage, compassion and character.

However, time and events have conspired to reveal a different attitude in the Oval Office. Today, this White House is more accurately defined by a striking form of relativism, a willingness to twist the truth and a propensity to use power for personal and political advantage.

Over the course of the past five years, transparency of government operations has steadily eroded. Open access to information critical to our democracy has been replaced by closed-door meetings and "no comment."

In fact, we can recount any number of incidents in which this administration has failed to take the responsibility or to be held accountable by the Republican-controlled Congress: from the inaccurate intelligence that led to our invasion of Iraq to the detainee abuses at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, from the revelations contained in the Downing Street memos to the realization that at least 20 federal agencies used taxpayer dollars to produce partisan television segments disguised to look like impartial news reports.

Time and time again, this administration has been let off the hook by their allies in Congress.

Worse yet, those who have dared to demand answers and accountability from the administration have gone from being celebrated as honored patriots to being attacked as subversive dissidents.

The deepening scandal surrounding the leaked identity of covert CIA operative Valerie Plame is perhaps the most poignant example of this today. At its worst, treason was committed by high-ranking White House officials. At its best, we have witnessed a startling abuse of power by this administration, one which has seriously compromised our national security, jeopardized the war on terror and placed the lives of a covert CIA operative and her contacts in danger; all of what so far appears to be a reprehensible act of political retribution.

What we know at this point is that, on July 14th, 2003, the covert identity of a CIA agent was revealed to the American public by conservative commentator Robert Novak.

As a direct result, an entire intelligence network was destroyed, and our ability to thwart another terrorist attack was recklessly compromised.

We know that a State Department memo containing Valerie Plame's identity was marked as classified and circulated on June 10th, 2003, under the direction of Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Marc Grossman.

We know that Secretary of State Colin Powell requested a copy of the memo the day after Ambassador Joe Wilson's op-ed discrediting the administration's case for the war in Iraq appeared in the New York Times.

We know that on July 7th, 2003, Secretary Powell took that memo on the Air Force One, where other senior administration officials may have had access to it.

We also understand that Press Secretary Ari Fleischer may have had access to the same document.

That very day, Karl Rove, the president's deputy chief of staff and senior political adviser, discussed the identity of Ambassador Wilson's wife with Time reporter Matthew Cooper.

We also know that the vice president's chief of staff Scooter Libby discussed Valerie Plame's identity with reporters.

Despite the information we have about the leak of Valerie Plame's identity, many questions remain.

Aside from Karl Rove, Scooter Libby, Colin Powell and Ari Fleischer, who else in the White House had access to the classified memo?

Given that so many of the president's men had access to the memo, it is incumbent upon Congress, the special prosecutor and the American people to ask the following difficult question: What did President Bush know about the Valerie Plame leak and when did he know it?

Is it possible that he and Vice President Cheney, along with most of Bush's inner circle, could have known about this plot to exact retribution on Ambassador Wilson at the expense of national security?

Is it possible that President Bush or Vice President Cheney could have been involved themselves?

These are tough, serious questions that must be addressed.

And while we will not get to the bottom of these questions here today, it is my hope that we will gain a more fundamental understanding of just how serious that breach of national security was.

A senior White House official disclosed the identity of a covert CIA agent, a statement of fact that is not disputed.

It concerns the direct and gross abuse of power inside the walls of the White House at the highest levels. The United States Congress has a constitutional responsibility to conduct a full, bipartisan investigation into this matter immediately.

Like former Republican National Committee Chairman Ed Gillespie, I believe the real world implications of this abuse are far more serious than Watergate, and warrant the same level of scrutiny and investigation.

This is not just dirty politics; it is a compromise of national security at a time of war. Before I close, I would like to address one other point, which I believe is particularly important.

When it was confirmed that Valerie Plame's identity was disclosed to reporters from inside the White House, the president made a promise directly to the American people. That promise was that he would fire anyone in his administration involved in the leak.

But last week, as his deputy chief of staff emerged as the primary culprit, the president broke that promise. In one defining moment, the president of the United States took the official stance that anything, which isn't technically illegal, is legitimate.

In doing so, he unequivocally redefined the standard for service at the highest levels of this government.

Apparently the action of all the president's men have only to meet the abysmally low ethical threshold of not being a convictable crime in a court of law in order to be acceptable to our president.

This is something that should deeply concern all Americans.

Such a precedent inescapably opens the door to countless unchecked abuses of power in the very heart of our democracy.

Unfortunately, these misguided priorities have come to define this White House. And as a result, we have not only damaged national security, but diminished the office of the presidency.

Yet despite the gravity of these incidents, we have failed to receive the answers demanded from the White House, and the pursuit for accountability and justice have fallen by the wayside.

We cannot let that happen this time.

America demands more than "no comment." We owe it to Valerie Wilson and to all of America's courageous intelligence agents to bring those who leaked her identity to justice.

Thank you. And I look forward to learning much from our expert witnesses this morning.